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Abstract

This investigation emerged out of the generally accepted propositions that understanding is a fundamental for building, or maintaining, positive human relationships and that meaningful interaction in any interpersonal relationship is dependent upon the communication of understanding. An instrument was developed containing a list of behaviors that gave teenagers the feeling of having been understood and the feeling of having been misunderstood. This instrument was administered to three groups of 100 teenagers each. The groups were: (1) from a rural environment, (2) from a high socio-economic community, and (3) incarcerated youth in correctional schools. Results show that teenagers of differing demographic locations and social behaviors are very much alike in their evaluation of behaviors that communicate understanding. The three most highly rated items were: (1) suggests ways I might solve my problems, (2) takes time to sit down with me, and (3) spends time with me discussing my problem. Verbal behavior is preferred to nonverbal behavior. Implications include a necessity to concentrate on the person with the problem, not other distractions, and on the person more than the problem. (Author/KJ)

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# BEHAVIOR THAT COMMUNICATES UNDERSTANDING AS EVALUATED BY TEENAGERS

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Basic to the history of man is the history of what is man-made. Human evolution cannot be differentiated from social relationships. Creating and maintaining positive man-to-man relationships continue to claim the concern of all who dedicate themselves to the perpetuation of a progressive civilization. That understanding, whether viewed as a concept or as a process, is necessary for positive human relationships as attested to in man's history, his literature, his art, and his music.

If understanding is the most fundamental attitude for building desirable social relationships, it follows that communication of this attitude is most important in positive interpersonal relationships. To receive, to accept, to understand the products of human intelligence and to communicate this understanding as a shared experience is a man's way of actively affirming the needs, the goals, the ideals of another person. It is this affirmation that gives substance to interpersonal relationships. It is this acknowledgment that accords personhood to another. It is this avowal that renders the word "human" significant when used with "being."

Thus, this investigation emerged out of the generally accepted propositions that understanding is a fundamental for building, or maintaining, positive human relationships and that meaningful interaction in any interpersonal relationship is dependent upon the communication of understanding.

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## Summary of Rationale and Procedures

Understanding was defined for this study as an expansion of human consciousness that permits one to feel that the other person "knows what it's like to be me in this particular situation." Two basic assumptions guided the investigation: (a) understanding can occur in any interpersonal relationship, and (b) understanding can be communicated.

This investigation was initiated to ascertain those particular behaviors which, when observed in another, are most likely to lead a young person to feel that he is being understood by the other person. The study was conducted in three phases. First, students enrolled in several public high schools in Florida were asked to describe a time when they had felt themselves to have been understood by another, and to include as much information as possible about the experience and the person who understood them. Second, from these narrative accounts, an experimental list of 100 behaviors was made. The list included behaviors that gave teenagers the feeling of having been understood and the feeling of having been misunderstood. These items were then fashioned into a Q sort of nine categories with a unimodal distribution. Q-Technique was used because it permitted translating a continuum of behaviors into a dichotomy of extremes, and because it provided a standard language for subjects.

And third, results from a test-retest of the instrument suggested 60 items with reliability coefficients of .82 or higher that were used in the revised instrument. This instrument was administered to three groups of teenagers. Each group had 100 subjects (50 boys, 50 girls), providing a combined group of 300 high school teenagers. Group I was made up of subjects in a rural environment; Group II was taken from a

high socio-economic community; Group III was composed of incarcerated youth in state correctional schools. Subjects were selected from these environments because they represented a broad socio-economic spectrum whose responses to the Q sort could be used to determine answers for these questions:

1. Which behaviors communicate understanding to teenagers?
2. In what ways, if any, do rural, urban, and incarcerated teenagers differ in their evaluations of behavior that conveys understanding?

A composite Q sort made from the 300 individual sortings showed the eight behaviors most likely to communicate understanding and the eight behaviors least likely to convey understanding. A list of these sixteen behaviors by rank order from most likely to least likely to communicate understanding follows:

Rank 1. suggests ways I might solve my problem.

2. takes time to sit down with me.
3. spends time with me discussing my problem.
4. listens to what I have to say.
5. asks me questions about my problem.
6. sticks to the problem that I want to talk about.
7. lets me know he has had a similar experience.
8. gives me his views on the problem.

53. uses harsh words in reacting to me.
54. looks at something else while I am talking.
55. just sits there like a bump on a log.
56. avoids talking with me about my problem.
57. hurries me through the telling of my experience.
58. turns from me to someone else and starts talking.

59. changes the subject immediately when I introduce my concerns.

60. jumps to conclusions before I finish giving the facts.

Individual Q sorts from each group were used to make a composite Q sort of behaviors that communicate understanding for each group. Comparisons were made among the three groups' Q sorts to test the null hypothesis that the three groups were not different in their evaluations of the behaviors. There were no differences in the way the three groups evaluated the 60 items.

## Discussion of Results

Four conclusions are indicated by an analysis of the 60 behaviors evaluated. First, the results leave little question but that teenagers of differing demographic locations and social behaviors are very much alike in their evaluations of behaviors that communicate understanding. However diverse their social, economic, or educational heritage, adolescents employ a common denominator for describing behaviors that indicate understanding. These behaviors fire a universal appreciation because there is nothing idiosyncratic about them, nor do these behaviors invite an examination for hidden meanings. Seemingly, a way of behavior is established and is trusted, and the young people who see it accept it as being "understanding" behavior.

A brief discussion of each of the three highest rated items is supported by an illustration of the behavior in a selected interpersonal relationship.

Item 13: suggests ways I might solve my problem. This behavior implies a cognitive knowledge of the person with the problem that is manifested through verbal behavior by the perceiver. The perceiver has

entered the internal framework of the other, has examined the situations, and, while still in the internal world of the other, offers solutions to the problem that can be assimilated by the person being helped. The following account, submitted by a 15-year old girl, points up the emphasis upon thinking and problem solving of the helper at work during his tenure in the other's internal world:

> Yes, I feel that at one time some person understood me quite well. About three mongths ago I was having a problem with boys that were too fast. They brought up the subject of sex everytime something was said. I found myself dating boys that were nice at first but later turned out to be "hoods"--literally.
>
> I knew I couldn't take much more of this, so I had a very long talk with a friend much older and wiser than myself. I felt that if I took this problem to my parents, they would only laugh and call it silly; but it was very, very serious to me.
>
> My friend told me to try and find out all I could about a boy before I went with him. He also told me that I was unaware of the fact that I was basically afraid of sex. He said that this was a normal part of life that I would have to accept. He explained to me that no one lived in a "sex-free" world and I would have to get used to the idea. This person did this in such a way that he was gentle, firm, but very understanding about the whole problem.

Item 19: takes time to sit down with me. Seemingly the understanding person can see the psychological burden of the other and uses the "sitting down" behavior as a nonverbal approach to sharing the weight of the problem being introduced. It is the perceiver's way of attesting to the importance of the situations; he is acting out the giving of time and interest to attend the concern of the other. Catharsis may be invited, as the account below suggests:

> My problem was that I had no one to discuss my problems or troubles with. Many times I became frustrated to the point that I felt like leaving home, but I became acquainted with a lady that would sit down

> for hours and counsel with me. Most of the time she didn't give any special advice, but just having her interested enough to be willing to sit and listen while I got the burden off my mind was very helpful to me. She showed she understood me and my problems by keeping my thoughts confidential and always being content with me.

Item 48: spends time with me discussing my problem. Such behavior bespeaks the equalitarian relationship established between the two persons involved. An examination of the facts is assumed, and a searching together for new ways to translate the freshly gained insights, or conclusions, is implied. Most important in this behavior is the value ascribed to the contributions proffered by the person having the problem. It is the helper's way of showing the other that he has resources for coping with his concerns.

> I have one friend in particular that I feel I can discuss problems with and be understood. I suppose this may be because we are the same age, come from similar backgrounds, and in general have the same problems. Quite often we go into depth on problems we don't even feel comfortable discussing with our parents. Another reason for this openness and frankness is that he and I think very much alike. Our methods of attacking problems and looking for solutions are alike.
>
> At times we find talking together to be most useful. He can look more objectively at my problems and throw a new light on them while I can do the same to his. For example, say that I am having girl troubles. He can look at my problem more objectively than I can because this particular problem is not his. He is also helpful because he has had similar experiences and can recall vividly how he solved them.

That understanding can be conveyed by a combination of these behaviors is borne out in the report below:

> Well, this hasn't been too long ago. As a matter of fact, it all happened within three weeks. Maybe this isn't much, but it really meant something to me. It all concerned a girl on whether I was to go steady or not. I tried to talk to my mother. She wanted me to go steady. She wouldn't listen to my side of

> things. She said I was just being silly about the whole thing. Then she wouldn't listen. I went to one of my closest friends. I told her my problem. She is one of those that will come out and tell you right then. She understood how I felt; by that I mean she had been faced with a problem similar to mine. She sat down and listened. Then she suggested some ways in which I could give the ring back without hurting the girl's feelings. This showed me that she understood me.

The second conclusion suggested by the results is: Understanding, to be communicated in a problem-centered situation, is characterized by these behaviors: (a) relate to the other person as an equal; (b) support the reality of the other's situation; and (c) participate actively in seeking a solution to the problem.

Relating to the perceived as an equal permits an interpersonal relationship to exist. That an equalitarian relationship is one of the three components of understanding reflects the openness of the teenager. To him, an equalitarian atmosphere is supported by these observable behaviors: takes time to sit down with me, looks at me when I talk with him, listens to what I have to say, spends time with me discussing my situation, allows me time to think while we talk, and expresses himself on my level.

With the focus on time in the foregoing items, there seems to be a recognition that relationships of value must be built, requiring the expendiure of time on the part of the individuals involved.

Supporting the reality of the other's situation as he presents it expresses the perceiver's respect for the other's individual world. The youth contends that the helper must say he is interested in what I have to say, must ask questions about my problem, and must stick to the problem that I want to talk about if he is "to know what it's like to be me in this particular situation."

To participate actively in seeking a solution to the problem of the other necessitates a sharing of the perceivers' world. Teenagers do not solicit understanding for a problem they feel themselves able to solve, nor do they raise questions when they already have answers. In turning to the helper, the young person says give me your views on the problem, let me know that you have had a similar experience, suggest ways that I might solve my problem.

The most valued behavior among these foregoing three is: suggests ways that I might solve my problem. When suggestions are offered, the perceived exercises his freedom of choice by selecting the one, or ones, that he believes himself best able to assimilate. He has not asked his helper to solve his problem; rather, he has asked that the uncluttered focus of his perceiver be verbalized.

The third conclusion drawn from the results of the item analysis suggests that adolescents rely upon the verbal behavior of the perceiver to signify his understanding. Of the 14 items keyed positive, 10 reflect a preference for verbal communication. This proclivity for verbal behavior is exhibited in a 6:4 ratio when subjects focus on behavior least likely to communicate understanding.

Personality development of the teenager is often described as a period in which the individual is shucking old, concrete behaviors so that he can assimilate a higher level of abstract behavior. During adolescence, the individual may be skeptical of trying to read meaning into any except the most obvious nonverbal behaviors. Seemingly, those physical behaviors that the Western culture labels "friendly" are rated POSITIVE ~~negative~~. The nonverbal positive rated behaviors have been reviewed earlier in this section. The nonverbal negative keyed behaviors are:

turns from me to someone else and starts talking, looks at something else while I am talking -- both indicate an avoidance to the person who is venting, or is trying to vent his concerns. Uses harsh words in reacting to me is an open display of hostility, as the tone of voice would indicate. Impatience or preoccupation with a discomfort may be conveyed by squirms about in his chair while we talk. It seems to the investigator that any nonverbal behavior that robs the perceived of being the focus will be interpreted as least likely to communicate understanding.

The fourth conclusion based upon the results of this study is: understanding is most likely to be communicated when the helper's primary focus is on the person and his secondary focus is on the problem. In Gestalt psychology and phenomenology, this behavior stresses the helper's focus on figure over ground. When the helper holds the person as figure in bold contrast to ground of the problem, he knows the other person fully. This is the helper's response to the demand of the other: know what I am like in this particular situation.

The following account serves as an illustration of how the figure-to-ground relationship is expressed in practice:

> I remember the first time that my father caught me drunk. He was waiting up for me when I came in at 1:00 in the morning. When I saw him, I tried to sober up, but it was no use. I was really potted. When he realized my condition, he saw that it was not the time to discipline me. The only thing he said was, "You're home kind of late, aren't you?" and put me to bed.
>
> The next day when I got up I was really expecting to catch hell. I was really surprised when my father came into my room with a joking greeting, "So you got drunk last night. Well, how does it feel?" I told him I had a headache. During the rest of our little talk, he was more serious. He told me that this was one of those things that every boy had to experience. He told me that he had done it, and it was nothing uncommon. He said that he

> wasn't going to punish me this time. Instead of telling me that it better not happen again, he explained the kind of trouble that boys get into when they are drunk. He would rather that I didn't embarrass him and myself by doing these things. As far as drinking is concerned, he said he didn't mind my drinking a little beer once in a while. "There is one thing you should remember, son," he said, "Anything in moderation is all right."

In summary, the evidence suggests that teenagers are very much alike in their evaluations of behavior that communicates understanding. Behaviors that relate to the person as an equal, that support the reality of the other's situation, and that participate actively in seeking a solution to the other's problem are necessary for understanding to be conveyed. Verbal behaviors are preferred over nonverbal behaviors to communicate understanding. When there is a focus on the person to be helped first and on the problem second, understanding is more likely to be communicated.

## Implications

Adults charged with the responsibility of helping teenagers to mature in a democratic community may find implications in this study. Teachers, counselors, youth leaders, parents -- all who influence the behavior of adolescents -- seek to understand them; many do understand teenagers. The problem may well lie in the adult's ineffectiveness to convey this understanding. It is for this problem that the study has its practical implications.

In order for understanding to be communicated, full focus must be on the person who has the problem. This implies a "tuning out" to other tasks which may usurp the attention of the helper. It necessitates a concern for the person's feelings first, his behavior second. It requires

viewing the teenager as being more interesting than his story. In his asking for this recognition, the teenager may be expressing his dissatisfaction with haphazardly formed relationships that are void of unconditional positive regard.

Assuming that the adult is able to enter the phenomenal field of the teenager and that he is able to see the problem as the younger person does, the adult must be willing or able to learn the language (verbal and nonverbal) used in that field. The adult cannot move out of the field and rely on the language of the adult to express his understanding. This study indicates that understanding must be expressed on the level of the one seeking help. It is his verbal and body language that must be employed.

The following account, taken from the speaker's experience with a beginning counselor, is added to illustrate this implication:

> The student, a ninth grade boy, had said, "Sometimes I feel like giving her a good hard kick in the rump, and then again I just want to hold her hand real easy like." The counselor reflected, "You feel ambivalent about your girlfriend." And the boy replied, "Oh, no! I don't feel that way at all. I just feel like being rough with her sometimes and being sweet to her, too."

Professional helpers who work with teenagers in groups and as individuals should be aware that this research does not offer a shortcut in how to communicate understanding without really having it. When the youth volunteered their descriptions and rated the subsequent behaviors, they did not suggest behaviors that fake understanding. In prescribing the behaviors that the other must display in order to convey his understanding, the teenagers provided a technique that is useful. However, their choice of behaviors, or technique, is so fashioned in authenticity that it cannot be used to manipulate them. Their evaluation of behavior

that communicates understanding does not provide the professional helper with a bag of tricks. The helper cannot fake takes times to sit down with me, nor can he fake spends time with me discussing my problem.

The highest rated item, suggests ways that I might solve my problem, is a mandate from the young people for an equalitarian relationship. It goes against the old traditional concept of advice giving when it is examined in comparison to the behavior least likely to communicate understanding, jumps to conclusions before I finish telling my story, which received the lowest rating among the 60 statements. These two items are at opposite ends of the continuum, thereby obviating an authoritarian relationship and a responsibility assuming role on the part of the understander.

In examing the high value that teenagers ascribe the behavior, suggests ways that I might solve my problem, counselors are reminded that in many counseling relationships the counselor is a figure of authority to his counselee. Consequently, suggestion as a technique employed to communicate understanding of the counselee should be used with the greatest caution. It is possible that even offhand suggestions or remarks not intended as suggestions may do great harm to the person seeking help if they are not carefully thought out. Suggestion may be appropriate at times to alleviate immediate anxiety or depression in the counselee, but this technique must be used with full awareness on the part of the counselor of his own self-interests, of the specific relationship in which he is involved, and of the individual who is seeking assistance.

Counselors who work with teenagers may find that the data point up the need for individualizing their techniques to communicate understanding. This implication stems from the teenagers' response to the question:

When a person understands you, how does he communicate it? The teenagers have replied:

1. Express yourself.
2. Express yourself in my language.
3. Express yourself in relation to me.
4. Express yourself in relation to me and my problem.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the present findings, which lean toward specific behaviors that convey understanding, support a cognitive, insightful, active participation of the counselor and counselee in the problem-solving aspects of the counseling relationship. This is consistent with the emerging concept of human nature that views man as basically capable of rational self-direction.

In the narrative descriptions of this investigation are seen several implications for the professional helper. Foremost among these significations is the power that understanding, when communicated, wields in shaping a positive self-image. Receiving, accepting, and understanding the manifestations of human intelligence and communicating this understanding to the other as a shared experience constitute a significant relationship for teenagers. Such a relationship leaves in its wake feelings that enable the understood person to use it as a point of departure for future experiences. It predisposes him to sharing his concerns, joys, ideas as they are experienced. The fullness of the personal convergence prepares the helped person to assume the helping person role when understanding is asked of him. Thus, this human concert is not diminished by the passing of time; rather, it is re-echoed in the emerging positive growth facilitator.